

# The 'Galla' Myth on Somali History: Origin and Impact

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## Abstract

The once-held assumption which has suggested that the 'Galla' occupied the Somali Peninsula before the Somalis has not been originated from the Somali tradition as claimed by some European authorities. It was hypothetically created and maintained by these authorities (explorers and scholars) from 1850s to 1960s. Despite the fact that the idea has scholarly been refuted from 1958 onwards, the sizeable literary works for it has largely hijacked the public opinion in the Horn of Africa as inducement for historical myth. It is the aim of this paper to address the source of this myth in the light of mostly oral tradition constraints.

## The Origin of the myth

Modern historical writings on Somalia have been started with that strange idea, which has suggested that the Somali has begun to expand from the northern coast of the peninsula just about a thousand years ago. By this expansion, the Somalis are assumed to have conquered their present homeland from Galla (Oromo) people throughout A.D. second millennium.

Meanwhile, a question about the historicity of the assumption has been raised, after presense of ancient Somali tribe, Bayso, has been observed in the far south of present Ethiopia. Bayso, who has been living in Lake Abbaya district for the most of their history, were reported by an explorer in 1902.<sup>1</sup> Despite this early discovery of important ethnological fact, the assumption has been undertaken amid contradiction with historical records and lack of evidences.

The assumption has seriously been challenged again from 1958 onwards, however. Herbert Lewis and Harold Fleming, working separately, have initially refuted the idea on the bases of linguistic accounts and the macro-Somalis' distribution.<sup>2</sup> Further studies have shed more light on the subject. New hypothetical works which also rely on the linguistic distribution of the Eastern Cushitics at general and Macro-Somalis at particular have been constructed. This hypothesis presumes that since more Eastern Cushitic languages and more Macro Somali dialects are spoken in the southern part of the Horn than any other place in the region, the origin of the Somalis then should belong to the Omo-Tana region,<sup>3</sup> where Omo River is in southwestern

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<sup>1</sup> Harold Fleming, 1964, 'Baiso and Rendille: Somali Outliers', pp. 36-8 (q. Oscar Neumann, 1902).

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Lewis, 1962, 'Historical Problems in Ethiopia and the Horn of Africa'; H. Lewis, 1966, 'The Origins of the Galla and Somali'; H. Fleming, 1964, 'Baiso and Rendille'.

<sup>3</sup> Herbert Lewis, 1966; Ali, Mohamed Nuuh, 1985, "History of Horn of Africa"; Sasse, Hans-Jurgen, 1979, "The Consonant Phonemes of Proto-East-Cushitic"; Black, Paul, 1975, "Lowland East Cushitic".

Ethiopia and Tana River is in north central Kenya. The old hypothesis has, therefore, been rejected and replaced.

Nevertheless, it is still required to emphasize the invalidity of the old hypothesis due to the following reasons: First, the idea is carried out by the majority of easily accessible records for the Somali studies, so the students still encounter these records primarily. Second, the masses in the Horn of Africa have widely been affected by the idea and they are not mainly aware of its replacement, which means the knowledge about the accepted view is still essentially confined to the concerned scholars. Third, as a warning step, the invalidation of the old idea should warrant an investigation of possible hypothetical bias within the accepted view, the northward Somali expansion. Strange as this may sound, our celebrated view has ignored to address about the inhabitants of central and northern Somalia before the supposed Somali expansion and failed to use all necessary methodological approaches on the issue. Fourth, Somalis have got blamed to be the source of the story about the supposed Galla occupation of the Horn, but such story has not been included in the Somali tradition. And eventually, the origin of the story needs to be addressed.

The idea has, in fact, been a coinage of these authorities and it is doing nothing with the Somali tradition. Confusing the name 'Gaalla' (Oromo) with the Somali term 'gaalo' (singular gaal), the idea was initially speculated by the British explorer, Richard Burton in 1854.<sup>4</sup> Two more Europeans mentioned it before the turn of the century.<sup>5</sup> However, it was an Italian Somalist, Enrico Cerulli, and later a British one, I.M. Lewis, who constructed it as a work throughout most of twentieth century. The two reputable scholars claim that they drew their conclusions from the Somali oral tradition. This tradition, the scholars argue, expresses about a Galla occupation of Horn of Africa before its present inhabitants, the Somalis.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, this tradition lends no contribution to the idea and the interpretations on which it has been based. In another word, there is no reference in the Somali tradition to any people that resided before them at any part of their homeland. Further, the Somalis in the Northeast and Southeast, who were primarily attributed to the story of supposed Galla occupation, did not know much about the existence of Galla or Oromo people before the second half of sixteenth century, let alone to have a tradition referring to an occupation. Even the Somalis that have been encountering the Oromo after that time do not collectively call them 'Galla' or even 'Oromo'. Rather, they have used localized names such as Qotti in Harar region; Arusa in Bali region; and Boran, Warday or Gaala-Madaw (black infidels) in the south.

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<sup>4</sup> Richard Burton, 1854, 1896 "First Foot Steps in East Africa", pp. 87-8.

<sup>5</sup> V. Grottanelli, 1975, in 'East Africa and Orient', ed. by N. Chittic & Rotberg, p. 51; Paulitschke, Phillipp, 1897, 'Ethnographie Nordost Afrikas'.

<sup>6</sup> Cerulli, Enrico, 1967, 'Somalia, Scritti vari editi ed inediti'; Lewis I.M. 'Modern History of Somalia', and 'The Galla in Northern Somaliland', 1960.

Thus, the authorities have just confused the term Galla or Gaalla (Oromo) with the Somali terms gaal (camel) and gaalo (infidels). There are many names in the Somali with prefix or suffix by gaal and gaalo. Thus, the hypothesis has basically been built on misconceived meanings of some Somali names. The tradition was misinterpreted and inadequately studied for the subject. In addition to misinterpreting the meanings of these names, attention was not paid to the basics of the tradition about the ancient inhabitants of the historical Somalia.

## **Somali Tradition and History**

The Somali oral tradition holds that the Somali generation of Tiiirri and Madalle occupied the land before the ancestors of the living Somalis. So that Tiiirri in the North and Madalle in the South were the most powerful tribes that are recalled by the tradition from Pre-Islamic Somalia. They are attributed to be behind the interesting antique earthworks throughout the Somali inhabited territories such as cairns or megaliths, rock paintings, large dams, and deep limestone-built wells. Similarly, the numerous ruined towns across the nation are ascribed to the ancient Somalis, and most of them came to be known by their own classic Somali names.

At this point the tradition accords with the Greco-Roman records regarding about 200 B.C. to 600 A.D. According to the records the Horn of Africa had been occupied by strong, commercially organized nation within continuation of Somali-like cultural and ethnical characteristics. They had maintained, particularly the Greeks, active commercial relations with that nation, but such relationship also existed between the nation and other civilizations prior to the coming of Greco-Romans into the region. According to the Somali tradition that nation was the Tiiirri-Madalle-led ancient Somalis.<sup>7</sup>

Even the Somalis in the Harar region, who have directly been affected by Oromo expansion for the last four centuries (as Herbert Lewis has noted), assert that the former inhabitants of the region were Tiiirri followed by Harle Kombe, and not Galla or Oromo. Similarly, the Oromo in that region recognize traditionally about the domination of Harle from Harar uplands to central Hawash before they acquired the land from them more than four centuries ago. The leading role of Harle among the Somali clans in Harar-Hawash region was also shown both by Muslim and Christian documents regarding the conflict between the Somalis and Abyssinians from 1320s to 1577.<sup>8</sup>

More importantly, no sign of linguistic or ethnical substratum has substantially been observed at any place in the Somali homeland. Recent genetic studies have also provided more evidence for the antiquity of Somali presence in the Horn. Scientists have found that Y chromosome marker, which characterizes the Somalis, shows that the Somalis, as a member of Eastern Cushitics, had been in their present homeland for about the last 4500 years within this separate gene marker.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Said M-Shidad Hussein, *Soomaaliya Dal iyo Dad*, 2009, with forthcoming revised edition, chapters 3 & 4; Ali A. Hersi, 1977, 'The Arab factor in Somali History', pp. 49-71.

<sup>8</sup> G.W.B Huntingford, 1965, 'The Glorious Victories of Amda Seyon', pp. 74, 106, 107; Enrico Cerulli, 1943, 'L'Etioopia Medievale'; Arab-Faqih, 'Futuuh-al-Habashah', ed. 1974.

<sup>9</sup> Juan Sanchez, C. Hallenberg and others, 2005, 'High frequencies of Y chromosome lineages...in Somali males'.

On the bases of historical records and ethnological evidences, long before the Oromo people began their historical expansion in the sixteenth century from the south of what is now Ethiopia, the Somali borderland had been encompassing a line from the foothills of Shawa plateau, through the highlands of Bali to the banks of Galana River which empties near Malindi. This is not shown only by the remnants of the ancient Somali communities at many places on this belt, but also by unequivocal old cultural influence of the Somalis on other peoples around and beyond the belt. The respective locations of these communities were addressed in the medieval documents of Awdal (Somali), Abyssinia, and the Portuguese of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.<sup>10</sup> Even some pre or Proto Somali groups, like Bayso, Arbore, Geleb and Elmolo got beyond the line more than about 2500 years ago.

Moreover, the Oromo people give us again a useful hint about the point of their location from this solid borderline. During their campaigns of conquest, Oromo employed the names of three groups who were their immediate neighbors in the direction of expansion. The tree names are Gabra and Jiida (two Somali tribes), and Sidama. They used these names for the other groups who came to encounter them beyond the three neighbors. In the Northern front, they applied Sidama to their enemies including Amhara, because Sidama were their historical challenging neighbors in the north. Of the Southern bound of the expansion, they named the entire Somalis 'Jiida' and 'Gabra' because Jiida were their historical neighbors in the northeast (Bali), while Gabra were their old neighbors in the east and southeast ( the Liban-Marsabit belt).

Jiida, who were already separated from Bayso by Sidama, were forced by Oromo to leave Bali for their present location, West of Muqdisho, apparently in between 1450 - 1550. But Gabra, who are probably descendents of Madalle and Garre, preferred to stay where they were eventually subdued and assimilated by Boran Oromo during the last four centuries. (Even the term 'gabra' means hostage or slave, a reference to the loss of power and identity.) Apart from the old contacts, Oromo initially moved over only towards Sidama, Jiida and Gabra,<sup>11</sup> and that is why the other groups got to be known by these names to Oromo.

These facts define the location of the Somali tribes that were particularly the historical neighbors of the Oromo. If the Oromo would have been familiar with an important Somali group other than Jiida and Gabra before the expansion, they would not ignore their national or tribal names until the twentieth century. But this does not mean that Oromo or Somali did not know about the common name of the other. The exchange of localized names, however, explains that their contacts before the Oromo expansion had mostly been confined to specific region. That region is the area relates to the water shed of southern branches of Jubba River which is the east and northeast of Lake Abbaya.

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<sup>10</sup> Braukamper, Ulrich, 1980, 1984; Lockhart, Donald, 1984, 'The Itinerari of Jeronimo Lobo'; Wolf Leslau, 1945; Said M-Shidad Hussein, 'Soomaaliya Dal iyo Dad', chapters 7, 8, 9 & 13.

<sup>11</sup> Herbert Lewis, 1966; Beckingham & Huntingford, 1954; Said M-Shidad Hussein, chapter 6; Turton, 1975, "Bantu, Galla and Somali Migrations in the Horn of Africa".

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